



Interplay of Realism and Romanticism in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*

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Abstract: Love, as a motif for life, may be expressed in various forms based on the individual and cultural identities. The novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* first published in Spanish in 1985 and then translated in English in 1988 was authored by Nobel-prize-winning Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1927-2014). The inspiration for the narrative was drawn from the love story of author's parents who had struggled to get married in the face of familial opposition. Despite its focus on reality, the plot also presents the idealization of Florentino's chronic romantic love for Fermina by making it an unconventional love story, set in the framework of temporal and spatial realities. In this context, the study explores how the idea of love moves from objective realism to subjective romanticism in the atmosphere of violence, death and epidemic outbreak resulting in social change. The focus is on the treatment of love which is not spontaneously realized but subject to the interference of hostile social and economic factors. By analyzing the presence of the elements of reality using the principles of literary realism, the paper attempts to show the struggles between social conventions and passion, aging and time, love as plague and the ultimate power and triumph of love over reality that not only defies age and time but also the social and biological laws. Further, Marquez's use of symbols such as yellow flag of cholera, flower, water and birds and their implied meanings help to justify the presence of realist-romantic elements in the narrative.

Keywords: realism, triangular love, passion, romantic ideals, socio-economic factors, cholera.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The Realist movement initiated in reaction to eighteenth century elite romantic ideals has been constantly evolving and transforming. Literary realism began as a cultural movement in France in the mid nineteenth century between 1850 and 1880 only to spread widely across all parts of Europe in the late nineteenth century. It was an artistic discourse focusing on the objective, the concrete, the physical and social realities depicting painstaking details to convey the ethos of the society in revolt against the abstract ideologies of romanticism. French artist Gustave Courbet (1819-1877), claimed to be the leading proponent of realism, painted the truthful and objective vision of contemporary ordinary life in his work of art so as to unearth the sordid and filthy elements of the society. Realism in literature became popular largely in the early twentieth century. Prior to it, when Europe was establishing empire in the other parts of the world Latin American Literature largely employed the technique of magic realism in naming and creating myths and stories about unknown places. As a literary and artistic endeavor, it aimed to reimagine the world and its reality. Though there are multiple stylistic traits of magic realism, the following key traits such as rejection of subjectivity and emotionalism, simultaneity of past, present and future and de-familiarization distinguish magic realism from the fantasy genre. However, Modernists who believed in the scientific and natural way of life shifted their focus toward capitalist ideologies in which life is driven by materialism.

Modern literature tended to depict life as it is and the way it is usually experienced: "so far as realism is concerned, we find that literature aims to surrender itself to the real world and, by the means of imagination and imagery, balances the truth". (Rajabi, Azizi & Akbari, 2020, p. 1). To this end, Marquez's novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1989) is one such narrative produced after the Boom period. 'Boom' was a modern literary movement in the 1960s and 70s in Latin America which highlighted the interdisciplinary concerns of commitment and experiment as well as ethics and aesthetics, characterizing the multiple relations between literature and social reality profoundly explored by a number of leading writers of the region such as Julio Cortazar, Jose Donoso, Carlos Fuentes and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The Boom writers were deeply influenced by tempestuous political landscape due to the proliferation of military regimes in South America. Colombian history of this period marked by political instability, civil war, drug-related violence, slavery and appropriation of indigenous land was also plagued by cholera epidemic. Against this background of 'inconclusive battles' and through different characters, Marquez articulates the intricate interplay of love which is not free from hostile social conventions, but fueled by economic and political factors and driven by modernist ideals. To this context Paz (1995) mentions that modern body is a soulless collection of functions and activities stripped off its sacredness and longs to possess the platonic love of the bygone era.



Objective: The paper aims to study how the idea of love perceived in the cultural context of Colombian society acts as a motif to demonstrate the social change in the wake of objective realism, subjective romanticism and by means of symbols and images.

2. Review of Literature:

The review of literature has looked into the Colombian belief system, myths, identities, histories and their way of life and interactions of different characters with one another in the typical Colombian social setting. The narrative is set in Colombian Caribbean society revolving around various themes and issues such as love and disease, political and civil unrest, economic induced social injustices and class distinctions. The narrative addresses these themes and issues through different characters' experiences and perspectives within the temporal and spatial framework. Marquez employs a blended array of narrative techniques which range from realism, romanticism and symbolism to journalism to capture the realities within the framework of surrealism which enhances the aesthetic value of his work. However, the study at hand focusses on the struggle between social conventions and passions, aging and time, love as plague and the ultimate power and triumph of love over reality amidst the struggle between the real and the ideal.

3. Discussion:

The novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* is first published in 1985 in Spanish and then translated in 1988 by Latin American translator Edith Grossman. It is divided into six units prefaced by Leandro Diaz's song as its epigraph which links the novel with the subject of love unfolding the struggles of the principal characters. The novel opens in '*in medias res*' with the death of Jeremiah Saint Amour and Dr. Juvenal Urbino on the same day which builds the suspense and curiosity and challenges the reader with certain degree of complexity. The narrative adopts the pattern of repetition, flashback and foreshadowing only to fall back to the traditional linear structure that propels the plot forward. It offers multidimensional understanding of love by depicting love in different stages of life and in a variety of forms such as in youth and old age, Platonic and erotic, lawful and unlawful, ephemeral and eternal, childlike yet sublime respectively.

From a structural standpoint, *Love in the Time of Cholera* opens in *medias res* with a deceased man that the reader knows very little about. Similar to how the death of Dr. Juvenal Urbino gives the narrator the chance to discuss love among the ruling class, the death of Jeremiah de Saint-Amour gives the narrator the chance to discuss the love between socially and economically displaced Black people and a secondary character about whom the reader knows nothing. The first chapter opens in *medias res* and features the death of Dr. Juvenal Urbino, who is 81 years old. However, this chapter also sets up the plot, which is thereafter narrated in chronological order—a technique that García Marquez uses less frequently. The epigraph, which implies that the structure might be understood as a song, a *vallenato*, offers an intriguing perspective on the organization of *Love in the Time of Cholera*. The epigraph reads:

The words I am about to express: They now have their own crowned goddess.

- Leandro Diaz.

For Florentino, Fermina truly is the crowned goddess, the *diosa coronada*. Throughout the book, Florentino reads the verse aloud at least five times. The crowned goddess alluded to in the epigraph is connected to the first time Florentino sees Fermina, when she is wearing what appears to be a Greek tunic and a garland of fresh gardenias in her hair, "making her look like a crowned goddess" (Marquez, 1989, p. 74). The phrases from Leandro Diaz's epigraph belong to a form of music called *vallenato*, which was influenced by a blend of African, European, and traditional Indian music. *Vallenatos* typically discuss folk heroes, love affairs, and other conflicts. Leandro Diaz is among the best known singer and songwriters of such genre. However Marquez chooses to use *vallenato* music by Leandro Diaz which is an obscure genre hardly known outside Colombia to signal the importance of popular culture which he views as a source of all cultures and it also signals Marquez's emphasis upon common people's interest.

The triangular love story revolves around three primary characters, namely, Fermina Daza and the two men who love her, Florentino Ariza and Dr. Juvenal Urbino De la Calle. Dr. Juvenal Urbino is the son of Dr. Marco Aurelio Urbino, the distinguished physician who by official decree holds power to design and direct the public health measures. Thus, Urbino's family takes the center stage in the public sphere. Whereas Florentino Ariza, who hails from a middle class family, holds neither social position nor fortune to win the hand of Fermina Daza. However, having been emotionally entangled to her, Florentino waits to unite with Fermina for more than half a century despite the fact that she got married to Dr. Urbino. Florentino's backward social condition limits his access to court Fermina Daza while Dr. Juvenal Urbino is preferred by Lorenzo Daza to give his daughter in marriage owing to his reputed family status. However, Fermina Daza later realizes the truth that, "Juvenal Urbino's suit had never been undertaken in the name of love...love was really what she most needed to live" (Marquez, 1989, p. 205).

Money and matrimony are shown to be an inevitable attribute of modern capitalist and class conscious society. The position of man in such a society is measured by his wealth and fortune than by earnestness and values. But, Florentino's persistent efforts enables him turn the table to his side using his artistic skill colored with rich emotions to pursue his love rather late in life. Florentino Ariza, the representative figure of traditional Colombian society who remained idealizing the past adopts the modern ways of life influenced by capitalist ideologies and attains social progress. He works hard in the River Company of Caribbean to climb the social ladder. The narrative labels this crucial change as the 'Turn of the Century'. The novelist hereby seems to discard the prejudices of



class distinctions. On the other hand, the modernist character Dr. Juvenal Urbino who leaves his ancestral home also puts an end to his family lineage as mentioned in the novel, “Dr. Urbino, resigned to paying homage to his lineage, turned a deaf ear to her pleas” (Marquez, 1989, p. 206). The doctor also tries to bring social change in the areas of health and sanitation though the mission was only partially fulfilled due to social resistance for the society was conditioned by traditional orthodox beliefs.

In the era of modernism, ‘Marquez makes his narrative in-exhaustive by blending realism and romanticism against the idea of exhaustive literary experience which uses only the elements of realism’ (Agarwalla, 2013). Modernist literature tends to use facts partially to depict events and the experiences of the characters with certain factual accuracy of details. This technique resorts to realism in order to capture the realities of life but at the same time without completely excluding the power of imagination. In this sense, the narrative under study is an interplay of realism and romanticism.

Florentino is passionately driven by the enthusiasm of writing love poetry and singing love waltzes fueled by his unrequited love. He has written at least six hundred poems in his collection titled *Love Companion* by the end of the narrative using his rich imaginative power in the face of rationalism and materialism and in fact, this is how he takes refuge in unrequited love. He refers to Daza as “maiden idealized by the alchemy of poetry” (Marquez, 1989, p. 64). His intense love surpasses ordinary love and becomes a feverish impulse creating conflicts with the symptoms of cholera. Is it the disease that medical intervention can cure or is it the dis-ease that only Fermina Daza can cure? In the labyrinth of conflicting laws of love, Florentino wanders as a limbo of abandoned bride. He often consumes the petals of gardenias which is a flower of promises and drinks cologne for Fermina ‘...until at last he succumbed to unconsciousness’ (Marquez, 1989, p. 65). The more he suffers the more he derives satisfaction. His mother rightly reminds that ‘the weak would never enter the kingdom of love, which is harsh and an ungenerous kingdom, and that women give themselves only to men of resolute spirit ...’ (Marquez, 1989, p. 65). Understanding this reality he tries to distance himself from the situation but only to return to the city where Daza lives notwithstanding the power of love: ‘he threw his petate never to return, never to again abandon the City of Fermina Daza’ (Marquez, 1989, p. 147). Whether he has to live or die, it has to be in the close premises of Fermina Daza. At the same time, he remains determined to break the socio-economic divide and acts upon building his fortune in every possible ways for one has to have resolute spirit to enter into the kingdom of love. Thus love becomes a driving force to change his economic status. He starts working day in and day out in the River Company of Caribbean and socially climbs to the higher position of Presidency in the company. He does all this merely to win Fermina Daza’s heart, irrespective of the time lapse. Against his aging body he was concerned about his physical appearance. Therefore, he covers his balding head with artificial hair and replaces his gums with artificial ones so as to retain his masculine pride and charm for Fermina Daza. Apart from his busy world of business in the River Company, he was more concerned about his health: “For her sake he had won fame and fortune without too much concern for his methods, for her sake he had cared for his health and personal appearance with rigor....” (p. 277).

Florentino Ariza would make a routine wish that Fermina Daza shall not die before him. Fermina had also the secret yearning for him when her marital life was in turmoil especially when the love of Dr. Urbino is divided between extra marital affair and legal family love:

One night she awoke with a start, terrified by a vision of her husband staring at her in the darkness with eyes that seems full of hatred. She had suffered a similar fright in her youth, when she had seen Florentino Ariza at the foot of her bed, but that apparition had been full of love, not hate. (p. 239).

Florentino Ariza had secret envy for Dr. Juvenal Urbino’s marriage to Fermina for he could not openly challenge that fact because of his inferior social standing. However, after a relentless wait for fifty one years, nine months and four days Florentino’s repressive love for Fermina Daza is chanced to reconcile when Dr. Juvenal Urbino dies while catching the escaped parrot. Within a year’s death anniversary of Dr. Urbino, the aged Florentino and widowed Fermina Daza unite against the age-old social conventions. Marriage at their age is perhaps inappropriate as Ofelia the daughter of Fermina argues: ‘Love is ridiculous at our age, but at theirs it is revolting’. (Marquez, 1989, p. 323). Fermina Daza reacts to Ofelia by saying:

The only thing that hurts me is that I do not have the strength to give you the beating you deserve for being insolent and evil-minded, but you will leave this house right now, and I swear to you on my mother’s grave that you will not set foot in it again as long as I live. (p. 323).

This is how Marquez debunks social norms and demonstrates the vow of eternal love although old couples cannot secure the perpetual replacement of an old member of the race by a newborn owing to inactive biological hormones because of old age.

Marquez also explores the existential angst of feeling through the solitude of love and of being loved. Most of the women characters in the narrative are widows except for Fermina Daza and her cousin Hildebranda and they are well adjusting to the married life though their partners are not of their preferences but influenced by patriarchal decisions greatly driven by class consciousness and material possession. Hildebranda’s husband is “not the man she still loved without hope but a soldier living on his pension whom she had married out of spite and who loved her to distraction” (Marquez, 1989, p. 253). Similarly Fermina Daza and Dr. Urbino’s marital life is not without turbulences. They often have to find sources to renew their love by visiting Europe. Dr. Juvenal Urbino would say “The problem with marriage is that it ends every night after making love, and it must be rebuilt every morning before breakfast” (Marquez, 1989, p. 209). Rebuilding love before breakfast is necessary not only for Dr. Urbino but also for any patriarchal figure in the society since household management is in the control of women. Therefore, this statement speaks volumes about marital life.

Further, the whole purpose of marriage seems to be for physical procreation and to attain sexual pleasure without any indication of spiritual procreation which makes their married life passive and meaningless. Their marital relation is further worsened by class differences often triggered by social intervention. Despite Fermina Daza’s haughtiness, she has to forgo so many of her



interests and adjust with her in-laws. She had despised eggplants ever since she was a little girl even before she had tasted them, because it always seems to her that they were the colour of poison yet she has to submit to daily diet of eggplant in all its forms. Her mother in law cuts her off by saying “A decent woman cannot have that kind of dream” (Marquez, 1989, p. 207) when she was narrating a dream of naked stranger. To her mother in-law even the utterance of the word ‘naked’ is not the respectful way of conversation in the reputed house of Viceroy. Fermina realized much later that behind his professional authority and worldly charm, the man she married was a hopeless weakling: a poor devil made bold by the social weight of his family name and ‘she was a prisoner in the wrong house’ (Marquez, 1989, p. 206). By patriarchal dominance she would be prisoner everywhere in the society but wishes she should not be in the wrong house as she has no liberty to pursue her interest not even in her dietary habits.

Marquez brings into discussion the multiple physical affairs of love as dominant issues irrespective of its moral concern. Although Dr. Urbino is a reputed public figure and a married man, he slips into an extramarital affair. He has connection with a black mulatto Miss Barbara Lynch the Doctor of Theology who is unhappily married for two years. This creates tension between the couple when Fermina Daza keeps a vigil after she discovers her husband’s affair through the smell of his clothes. Not resisting the secret affair of her husband she walks off the situation not even negotiating the matter and with the thought of never returning. However after living with her cousin Hildebranda for two years she already misses and yearns for her husband to call her back yet she conceals it out of her ego and pride. Dr. Urbino would say “at the age of forty, half in earnest and half in jest” (Marquez, 1989, p. 247) but when he found himself lost in the labyrinth of Miss Lynch, he no longer was jesting. Similarly Florentino Ariza left no single woman without making love, not even his blood relatives and irrespective of age differences, married or unmarried. America Vicuna is a fourteen year old school going girl who is the blood relative of Florentino with the age difference of grandfather and granddaughter yet he manages to make love with her. Leona Cassiani is beheaded by her husband after her unfaithful relationship with Florentino Ariza. According to Freudian psycho analytical model, hunger, sexual desire and other biological designs are difficult to suppress by the pre-conscious and conscious parts of human psyche since they are instinctive. Therefore Dr. Urbino and Florentino’s repressive desire could not be suppressed by the reality and moral principles when seductresses were around them. Moreover to this end, none of the coy mistresses in the narrative reject Dr. Urbino and Florentino’s love proposal. To them love is the gift of pleasure and more of “physical love from waist down” (Marquez, 1989, p. 199). The love expressed by the characters in the narrative resonate the western interpretation of love by Paz (1995) in his collection of essay *The Double Flame: Love and Eroticism*. Octavio Paz claims that love in the West, is an exercise in freedom, a creative and subversive sentiment where as in the East love has been conceived within a religious tradition. He regrets that modern sexual freedom has become a narcissistic pursuit, accompanied by the erosion of family and personal values and holds the view that certain practices such as promiscuity and the desire for money are said to be the worst enemies of the concept of love since they distort its essence as it did to the genuine love of Florentino Ariza for Fermina Daza.

Marquez also uses distinct plotlines in the narrative to debunk the traditional culture and ancestral heritage of the Colombian society. For instance, Dr. Juvenal Urbino the optimistic modernist figure is the transgressor of traditional culture. Firstly, he marries a lady from the low class family against the social will. Fermina Daza despite her haughtiness struggles to manage her life against the social current though she is often criticized for her act of marriage to a member of aristocracy as they are from different social rungs. Secondly, Urbino leaves his ancestral home. The act of leaving ancestral home is a sign of distancing and abandoning the ancestral heritage. And thirdly his son has no children and his daughter has only a girl child and no male heir is a significant sign of discontinuity to the family heritage. Similarly, Florentino Ariza tries to eliminate his anonymity by accumulating fortune to climb the higher social rung besides dignified profession and power in the capitalist driven world. This represents the evolution of Florentino from traditional to modernist way of life who seeks access to the social system. The female characters such as widowed Fermina Daza and widow Nazaret deviate from the established social codes. In the case of Fermina Daza, she could not wait to until the completion of the first year death of her husband but is eager to build a relationship with Florentino Ariza which according to orthodox Catholics is immoral as women have to maintain their widowhood for the remaining life or if she wills to remarry must undertake the permission of archbishops, which Fermina Daza least heeds. Moreover she remarries at the age of seventy two which according to social convention is a disgrace to the society and her family. In addition during the one year death anniversary of Dr. Juvenal Urbino in the text:

She broke with convention and did not stay in her sear, according to the customs of the day, to receive the spiritual renewal of condolences, but made her way instead through the crowd to thank each one of the guests: an innovative gesture that was very much in harmony with her style and character. (p. 298).

Similarly Nazaret loses her purity by engaging in sexual pleasure with Florentino Ariza not so long after her husband’s death in the civil war. Thus Marquez deconstructs the conventional social norms and orthodox beliefs and embraces modernity demonstrated through his characters in the narrative. Today, the idea of seeking partners to take care of each other during old age is increasing for families are nuclear and children move away from their parents. At old age, after the loss of life partner, one is left alone which invites the need of seeking trusted partners especially in the old age. According to Jelin and Munoz (2003, p. 2), the family is seen as an important resource for its members and as a refuge for those who live in conditions of social exclusion, insecurity, violence and old age which leads to the formation of nuclear family. In the metropolitan cities migration is considered to be the strategy for upward social mobility (McCarthy, 2020) in which industrious section of people either takes transnational migration or intra migration leaving old section of people at home. Thus, such situation invites deconstruction of age old social codes of confining the relationship based on age or hierarchy.



Marquez's journalistic background enables him to develop the narrative to be investigative depicting all nitty-gritties while the narrative is romantic in nature to certain degrees with poetic elements. The real historical accounts of the narrative are depicted by journalistic capabilities while romance is depicted by lyricism. He uses specific dates such as "on seventh of July at six o'clock in the evening" (Marquez, p. 325) and more over he employs the press in the narrative to expose the social the Journal named *Justice*. None of the places mentioned in the narrative are fictional but they are real and existing places such as Panama, Magdalena, San Juan de La Cienega and La Manga to name a few which is another striking feature of realist narrative. By culling out these details, the study accomplishes the objective of making the narrative realist romantic.

Cholera as an element of reality is used as symbolic trope in the narrative to indicate the dual possibilities of love, that of being forbidden and getting reunited. Symptoms of Cholera in the initial chapter of the novel is confused for love sickness by Florentino Ariza: "...to conclude once again that the symptoms of love were same as those of cholera" (Marquez, 1989, p. 62). But he continues to withstand the pain and 'longed to enjoy his martyrdom' (Marquez, 1989, p. 62). In the concluding chapter of the novel, old Florentino and Fermina board the boat of the River Company of Caribbean that has a yellow flag signaling the danger of cholera to avoid other passengers to board the boat thus establishing their reunion. The novelist has given a symbolic name to the boat calling it *New Fidelity* which means to start a new faithful love. Florentino passionately maintains his relationship with Fermina through writing love poems and love waltzes. He also helps many other unrequited lovers to unite with his sentimental love poems.

His most pleasant memory of that time was of a very timid young girl, almost a child, who trembled as she asked him to write an answer to an irresistible letter that she had just received, and that Florentino Ariza recognized as one he had written on the previous afternoon. He answered it in a different style, one that was in tune with the emotions and the age of the girl, and in a hand that also seemed to be hers... He wrote, imagining to himself what Fermina Daza would have said...each came to thank him separately...they were going to marry. (p. 172).

Thus, Florentino is the true lyricist representation of romanticism who faces a lot of difficulties to embrace the realities of writing official letters when he becomes a clerk in the River Company. He sings sentimental waltzes day and night near Fermina Daza's home in the garden of Evangels for his Crowned Goddess. One important feature that lays foundation for romanticism in the narrative is the establishment of Poetic Festival by Dr. Juvenal Urbino in which Florentino Ariza participates annually along with many others. Through such events, the novelist uses his distinct style of narrating the realities of the Colombian society blending it with certain aspects of romanticism by going back and forth in time.

4. Conclusion:

Realities can be blended with certain aspects of romanticism such as engagement of intense imagination, emotions, individualization and certain affiliation to nature. The authors of this paper claimed that imagination should not be miraculous, mysterious and fantastic which are in fact the principal features of magic realism. On the contrary, the study examined how true romantic love thrived in the middle of hostile social and cultural factors through characters' endurance and plights. The central character Florentino Ariza endures his forbidden love for Fermina Daza through lyricization of his love waltzes against social currents and gets united after fifty one years, nine months and four days at their old age. His glorification of love for Fermina Daza was emotionally intense from the initial stage to the last phase of their love. This ideal nature of love also questions the validity of different forms of carnal love exhibited by the characters in the narrative including Florentino Ariza's pleasure principles. Nevertheless, toward the end, Plato's definition of love triumphs as it transforms into a desire for the perpetual possession of the good. Though procreation is one of the features of love, it transcends the physical level to become platonic, for, only through the attainment of spiritual and physical procreation that love will meet 'goodness'. The union of Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza rewards their love to be undying, harmonious and beautiful despite the brutal interventions of social conventions and biological factors. Eventually, they move to the realm of platonic love governed by goodness and positivity.

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